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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: priority theme: initiation of the overall review of the implementation of the outcome of the Summit

Statement submitted by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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1) Social Services for All

In preparation for this session of the Commission an Expert Workshop was held on "Innovations in the Delivery and Financing of Social Services." The report of this workshop rightly puts its finger on one of the major challenges in ensuring that services provided do in fact reach those most in need of them in a way properly adapted to their needs:

> *"[T]he notion of the 'passive recipient' should be transformed into that of an 'active participant' who defines the service in accordance to perceived social needs, evaluates its efficiency, provides ideas to improve its quality, and makes sure that the user feedback provided is taken into account. [...] [E]xperience has shown that educated and politically conscious rural people can ensure through local agitation that the rural clinics run properly in their villages, while empty clinics still prevail in other places where the general population is neither so educated nor politically conscious."* (Paragraphs 26-27)
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> *"Some users cannot speak for themselves. The very young, and sometimes the ill and older persons, are examples of such users. They are users who should not be forgotten. Groups of volunteers should reach out to these groups to bring them into the system."* (Paragraph 37)

There are still other people who are not ready to speak for themselves. Adults who have been wounded by conditions of absolute poverty all their lives have rarely been given reason to believe that anyone would ever value their thoughts. Nor have they often had the opportunity to think calmly, without being hemmed in by issues of survival, or to enter into a respectful exchange of thoughts with their peers, in order to make a contribution to the shaping of social services, or any other debates taking place in their communities. Many conditions are necessary in order to change this situation, and to work in partnership with these adults.

The Expert Workshop Report names certain conditions, such as fostering democracy, involving community leaders, safe-guarding against "diverting benefits to the wrong people," and by valuing the contribution of the poor. These efforts are all important, but they are not sufficient. In many countries, all these conditions are met - and yet certain families can remain for generations completely marginalized, and sometimes hurt by social services intended specifically to benefit them. There are still other conditions necessary for fruitful partnership with the poorest. These conditions have been set out both by UNICEF and by France in ways that deserve the attention of this Commission.

UNICEF, in a study co-authored with ATD Fourth World[1], began with the principle that a human rights-based approach to any programming means that it is essential to reach each and every human being. This does not mean developing separate programs to target the poorest, which would serve only to stigmatize them further. It does mean however that, by starting and designing a given project with those least likely to be included in any development efforts, there is a much greater chance of creating a project that will reach, and be of use to all. To cite one example from this study, a project was planned to fight early childhood malnutrition in Guatemala. The first step was getting to know and gradually creating opportunities to think together with families whose existence in the district was almost completely hidden from view, and who had enormous difficulties protecting the survival of their children. It was these families who made it clear that it would be impossible for a project focused on malnutrition to work for them. They bore too heavy a burden of shame and guilt for having watched some of their children die. The project they designed focused instead on their hopes for their children, by emphasizing early childhood education and cultural development. Through this project, they were also able to address

[1] *Reaching the Poorest*, being published in January 1999.

malnutrition; and malnutrition proceeded to decline in this district.

In the case of France, a pioneering "framework law" on eradicating poverty was adopted on 9 July 1998. This law lays out an overarching strategy for fighting poverty in every domain, from social services to tourism to culture. Future laws will have to follow this framework. The most innovative aspect of this law is that for the ten years it has been in the making, some of France's very poorest and most disadvantaged citizens have had the opportunity to collaborate on shaping it, through extensive participation by civil society organizations.

One last point must be raised on the issue of social services for all. The Expert Workshop Report states that "parents generally should be considered as the primary caretakers and their inputs on child rearing should be weighted heavily in decision making." (Paragraph 30) This cannot be stressed enough in an era when children in wealthy countries are routinely denied the right to be raised by their own parents for no cause other than their extreme poverty. In 1996, a mother from a northern European country met with officials to question why she had for the past ten years been denied the right to so much as visit her son - all while being allowed to raise her daughter. The son had been taken into foster care at a time when the mother was having extreme difficulty making ends meet. Because her daughter was born when she was scraping by a little better, no one questioned her ability to love and raise her - and yet it was considered too late for her to have any claim left to her son. Her question remains unanswered.

It is unconscionable that it has long been routine in North America and Western Europe for the poorest parents to have their every action determined by the threat of their children being taken into foster care - even if this means that they are driven to live in hiding, avoiding any use of even the most essential health or education services so that they can preserve their bonds of love with their children.

2) Preparing the Review of the Implementation of the Outcome of the World Summit on Social Development

We join many States and civil society organizations in regretting that there is as yet no agreement on any participation of non-governmental organizations either in the second Preparatory Committee, or in the Special Session of the General Assembly itself. It is positive that some kind of participation will be part of the first Preparatory Committee. However, more is necessary, given that implementation of the commitments made in Copenhagen continues to hinge in significant ways on the expertise and resources of civil society.

A) Microfinance. Concerning the content of this review, microfinance initiatives will certainly be part of the agenda. The Report of the Secretary General on the Role of Microcredit in the Eradication of Poverty (A/53/223) is a valuable contribution on this subject. This report is frank about the limits of microcredit in reaching the very poorest. For this very reason, it was derided in an "Aide-Memoire" that was circulated anonymously in the Second Committee of the General Assembly last fall. Although the UNDP has since seconded some of the Secretary General's reservations about microcredit[2], a great deal remains to be said.

The Secretary General's report states:

"[T]he poorest of the poor are usually not in a position to undertake an economic activity, partly because they lack business skills and even the motivation for business." (Paragraph 13)

This disturbs the authors of the "Aide-Memoire", who write,

"To portray the poor as lacking motivation to take on economic activity [...] goes against the pronouncement of the recent major global conferences that placed confidence in the people living in poverty as having been intrinsically capable of working their way out of the poverty trap when presented with the right opportunities."

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[2] *"Access to savings is often more important than credit for the poorest, who often cannot assume the risk of becoming indebted. [...] [M]icrofinance is not a magic wand for poverty eradication. [...] Successful micro-businesses require people with some entrepreneurial ability. But with little or nothing to fall back on, the poor can be reluctant to strike out in new directions." Overcoming Human Poverty*, UNDP, October 1998, p. 34.

It is indeed true that every human being deserves our collective confidence in their ability to contribute to the advancement of the human race. However certain nuances are being ignored. It is significant that, while the Secretary-General referred to the poorest of the poor, the "Aide-Memoire" speaks only generally of "the poor", a vast and diverse group, with immense and easily tapped potential for entrepreneurship. But when we take the time required - years, and sometimes decades, to build mutual trust with some of the very poorest people in both developing and industrialized countries - it becomes clear just how unwieldy are the obstacles keeping them even from surviving with any semblance of dignity, let alone being prepared to benefit from the possibility of doing business with neighbors who mistrust them - and exposing themselves to great debt. They may indeed be motivated, but this does not guarantee their survival.

At the Microcredit Summit Meeting of Councils (New York, June 1998), a keynote speaker presented the successes of a microcredit program she runs in Chicago. However when running a small discussion group, she expressed grave reservations about the appropriateness of microcredit for the poorest of the poor, and spoke of the crisis they are plunged into if their business fails, leading to the repossession of their few worldly goods, and to their subsequent stigmatization as a bad credit risk. Another participant in this Meeting of Councils had formerly worked as a consultant for the UN in remote rural areas of Southeast Asia. She agreed with the keynote speaker's assessment: "Those concerned with their daily survival can't participate in microcredit schemes. We had much better success with those who were a little better off."

Another microcredit program in Asia tries to target the "poorest" by having every member of a community publicly list all of his or her possessions - and then asking the others to vote on whether the declaration was honest, and on just how poor the person is. Given that no one with any choice in the matter would want to be part of such a humiliating process, and given that community members might feel pressured to vote for their most powerful members to receive credit, as opposed to selecting the poorest, it is hard to fathom how such a process can actually help credit to reach the poorest with any accuracy or dignity.

It is true and laudable that many microcredit schemes enable poor people to change their destiny for the better. But we must stress how crucial it is to remain aware of its limits while continuing to seek additional measures to eradicate poverty.

B) Cultural Development. Such measures must include awareness of the importance of cultural development. We welcome the General Assembly's Second Committee draft resolution on Cultural Development (A/C.2/53/L.35). This resolution notes the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, held in Stockholm from 30 March to 2 April 1998. However it fails to voice the hope formulated in that conference's Plan of Action that the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006) will include a year "devoted to the connections between culture and development and the elimination of poverty" (point 8).

The UNICEF publication, Reaching the Poorest, stresses the importance of culture, as does the UNESCO-NGO publication *Culture and Development: "Culture, a Way to Fight Extreme Poverty"*.[3] This latter publication demonstrates how cultural projects make it possible to get to know the very poor without defining them through their difficulties ("the illiterate, the undernourished..."). This builds a relationship where the very poor are more likely to feel recognized as human beings, and then to involve themselves in taking initiatives. One example included in this NGO-UNESCO publication is of a teenager in Latin America who scavenges in a garbage dump for survival - and yet who took the initiative of involving younger children in an art and reading activity taking place regularly at the dump.

Art, music or poetry can begin as a respite from the intolerable and from violence. Fourth World volunteer-worker Martine Hosselet offers very poor adults the opportunity to paint. She writes, *"Many young people tell us that they started to lose their balance, to get tough, because they felt apart, like outsiders. How else than with fists or tears can people speak of the beauty to which*

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[3] UNESCO Section of the Cultural Dimension of Development, World Decade for Cultural Development, 1988-1997, CLT-97/WS/8, Paris, 1997, 109. (The French edition was published by Editions Presence Africaine, 1997. ISBN 2-7087-0636-5)

they aspire, the peace and calm which people need in order to live? All people, and more than anyone else those living in the most extreme poverty, need beauty and poetry just as much as they need bread. Not before and not after bread. At the same time. Every man and woman needs beauty and creative expression at the same time as they need food in order to maintain their dignity, to maintain within themselves this space of freedom where one can invent the future, and without which one might as well be dead."

Because the very poor must devote all their energies to survival, they are often unable to preserve their culture or their history. This leads to them being seen as ignorant. Cultural development can thus provide a way to build on the richness of people's history, and to safeguard this history against the oblivion that threatens the very poorest so severely that they are often forced to leave their loved ones in unmarked gravesites, or even to break off contact with their children, severing the thread of family memory.

When the very poor are given access to culture, they can show the value of their experiences, first to themselves, and then to other members of their community. They can use it to build a bridge of communication to reach the society that has progressed without them. Fourth World volunteer-worker Regis De Muylder, who has run a cultural project in Central America on the edge of an enormous garbage dump where many children and adults work scavenging for anything that can be washed and resold. *"We met very deprived families who have been driven away from everywhere else. We planned to set up a street library there [with books and art material for children]. A man told me, 'We don't want any books here. We have to fight just to feed ourselves. Children are dying of hunger. If you show books to the children, you will melt their hearts.' The activity happened nevertheless. And in the end, this man took a coin from his pocket and offered it to me. He said, 'Here, this is for the bus ride. You are doing a good thing. People do not live on bread alone.' [...] Because culture is an exercise in creation, it allows each person to place themselves on a par with all others. Some people are so poor that their final means of protection is to get themselves forgotten. Culture breaches this imprisonment. On the one hand it is necessary for culture to penetrate into very poor environments. And on the other hand culture must allow itself to be impregnated with the experience of the very poor, with their suffering, hopes and courage."*

3) In Conclusion

We recommend that this Commission:

- Pay particular attention, in considering "Social Services for All," to the methods by which these services truly can reach all people, especially those who need them most, in ways that respect family ties.
- Prepare the Review of the Implementation of the Outcome of the social summit with an agenda that gives ample weight to cultural development.
- Urge the General Assembly to follow the suggestion in the Stockholm Plan of Action that the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006) include a year devoted to the links between culture and development and the eradication of poverty.